

## OPEN LETTER TO TASK FORCE

From Tom Horne, State Superintendent of Schools

November 6, 2008

I know that you will be studying a great deal of research, and will arrive at an independent conclusion as to what is best public policy. I hope you will be open to receiving input from me, as the official elected statewide to deal with education matters and from the Department of Education. We have 570 people who work full time on education, and over the years have accumulated a lot of information, some of which may be helpful to you.

What follows is a modified version of an open letter that I wrote to the state legislature, after it passed the bill that created this task force. If you would like to read that letter, it is on our website [www.azed.gov](http://www.azed.gov), under Horne's speeches and articles. In my letter to you, I am omitting the more political aspects of my letter to the legislature, and adding some additional public policy considerations.

### I. The AIMS Test is Our Only Mechanism for Holding Schools Accountable.

In a poll required and financed by the state legislature, the public was asked "Do you favor or oppose using statewide tests to determine how schools are performing?" Sixty-six percent favored, 30 percent opposed, and 4 percent had no opinion. Carolyn Warner\* had CUES, Diane Bishop\* dumped that and started ASAP, Lisa Graham Keegan\* dumped that and started AIMS. When you keep dumping what you have and start something new, there are enormous startup costs each time, there is no opportunity for stability and continuous improvement, and teachers take nothing seriously because they know it will soon be replaced. We have now had AIMS for 12 years, and have the opportunity for continuous improvement.

AIMS is the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards test. To understand AIMS, one must understand the standards movement throughout the country.

### II. The Standards Movement.

The quality of public education in the United States began sinking in the 1960s, and the downward trend accelerated. One of the great qualities of a representative republic is its capacity for self correction. The public noticed how little high school graduates knew, and demanded a change. That change was the standards movement.

Standards are developed by teachers brought together from around the state, and ultimately approved in any subject at our website [www.azed.gov](http://www.azed.gov), click on "Standards."

Teachers are now teaching the academic standards to their students.

---

\* For the more youthful readers: these are former state school superintendents.

Every question on the AIMS test is a measurement of a performance objective. This is what makes AIMS unique. AIMS is the only test where you know the students have been taught the subject of the test questions, because the teachers have agreed to teach the standards, and every question is a measurement of a standard. That is why AIMS is the only test that can fairly hold schools, teachers, and students accountable.

AIMS is no longer a secret test. You can take a sample AIMS test by going to [www.azed.gov](http://www.azed.gov) "AIMS – Take the Test."

### III. Was the AIMS Test "Dumbed Down?"

Some people charged that the AIMS has lost value because it has been "dumbed down." But last year there were 3,000 students whose teachers had given them passing grades, and who had the credits to graduate, but who could not pass the AIMS test after five tries. The same people who claim that AIMS has lost value because it has been dumbed down, often support the decision of the governor to sign a bill that permitted these same students to graduate with "augmentation" using the subjective grades that they received from teachers. You can't have it both ways. If the AIMS test is too easy, or was dumbed down, then the governor should not have signed a bill permitting graduation by the students who could not pass an objective test, based on subjective grades given by teachers.

The difficulty of the test has not been changed since 2005. In 2005, the AIMS tests had to be revised because for the first time we had standards for every grade level, and needed new AIMS tests to assess these new standards. That is the only change since the test started in 1996, except high school math in 2001.

The method used to determine the cut scores (the percentage of right answers needed to pass) had to follow certain standards, as required by the federal government. The determinations were initially made by task forces of teachers drawn from all over the state, who decided what level of difficulty constituted "proficient." This then had to be approved by the State Board.

Eighth grade math had always had a much higher failure rate than all other grades, (including high school) and its failure rate was brought into line with the other grade levels. In high school math, I thought the recommendation of the teachers reduced the level of difficulty too much and recommended to the State Board that a higher level be applied. The vote was eight to one against me. The other eight board members wanted to follow the process that had been set up with the teachers, and I can understand their position. I still believe I was right. But understand that if the Board voted as I recommended, the number of students with the credits to graduate who could not graduate because they did not pass the AIMS test would have been higher than 3,000. Here again, no one can consistently criticize the Board's decision, yet support the governor's decision to allow students to graduate who had not passed the AIMS test.

The only way I could have seen to it that the level of difficulty was higher in the recommendation that went to the State Board would have been to limit the task force to a group of elite teachers, rather than the diverse group that we did use. I believe that would have been wrong.

IV. Is AIMS a “Bad” Test?

Some people have been quoted as saying that AIMS is a “bad” test. There is absolutely no basis for their saying that, and it is a totally false statement. Although Arizona teachers write the questions, the psychometrics are validated by one of the largest two companies in the country in that field. Knowing that we could be sued over students not graduating, as many other states have been, we have had a national advisory board of the very top national leaders in psychometrics approve every step that we take. Under No Child Left Behind, the federal government must approve the standards-based test (in our case AIMS) that every state must have. Arizona was one of the first ten states approved out of 50 states. The Fordham Foundation is the principal institution for ranking standards. Arizona standards ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of 49 states. Arizona ranks first out of 50 states in the category “curricular content, standards-based reform, and school choice.”

V. AIMS Rewards Not Only Proficiency, But Also Excellence.

To be a highly performing or excelling school, the school must have not only a given percentage of students proficient, but also a given percentage of students as exceeding proficiency. Students who exceed on all three AIMS tests, and meet certain other academic requirements, receive a full tuition scholarship at our state universities. 3,800 students now receive this benefit, and I believe their families are appreciative.

VI. Discussion with Rich Crandall, Sponsor of the Legislation.

This morning, I served on a panel at a program sponsored by the Arizona Educational Research Organization. Joe O’Reilly, a member of this task force, was chair of the panel. Rich Crandall, who sponsored the legislation creating this task force, also served on the panel. In response to a direct question from me, Rich Crandall confirmed that the intent of the legislation was that the “Arizona Assessment of Achievement Test” proposed as a possibility in the legislation and which is to be considered by this task force, was to supplement, and not supplant, the AIMS test. Because the legislation was somewhat ambiguous on this point, it was something of a relief to me to hear this about the legislative intent.

VII. How to Test at Levels Higher than AIMS.

Also in the panel discussion this morning, Representative Crandall talked about the concerns that led to the legislation, and these are concerns that I strongly agree with as well. AIMS is a good test for students up to a certain level of ability, but we need to be

putting more energy into the students at the high levels of ability. I have always objected to the federal system, which focuses on nothing but proficiency, and have had a number of initiatives aimed at making sure that all students reach the maximum level of their capability. With respect to testing, I have advocated for end-of-course testing for courses not covered on the AIMS test. This would include end-of-course testing in Algebra II, Pre-calculus, Physics, Chemistry, Earth Science (in high school science at this time we are testing only Biology), American History, World History, Government, Economics, and voluntary tests in the Arts. At higher levels, such as Calculus, we have the AP tests. There are many good reasons to have statewide end-of-course tests (since they would be measuring standards, they would also be AIMS tests) and I can discuss them with you in greater detail if you wish.

The legislation speaks about examining the experiences in other states that have adopted tests that are required for graduation from high school, and that incorporate a national college admission and placement exam. I have concerns about requiring all students to take tests that incorporate a college admission test. Currently in Arizona, as in the nation generally, about 20 percent of our students graduate from college. We need to increase this. If we were to double it, from 20 percent to 40 percent, that would be a magnificent achievement. But we will never get to 100 percent, or anywhere near it. No society could provide to all of its citizens the kinds of jobs that college graduates have a right to expect.

We need to increase the number of students taking college entrance tests. The idea of requiring all students to take them ignores the immutable law of human variability.

One of our new urban myths is that to be work ready requires as much academic achievement as to be college ready. Many students in our Career and Technical Program are well prepared for well-paying jobs without reaching college level academics.

A company called Public Works did a report for the P-20 Council in which they alleged that to be prepared for today's job market, students need four years of mathematics including Calculus. However, this assertion was contradicted by its own backup data, contained in appendices to its report. Part of those appendices is attached as Exhibit A to this open letter. It lists well-paying jobs expected in Arizona's future economy. There is a column headed "Work Key." Work Keys is a system of symbols that indicates what skills are needed. It is on a scale of 1-7 with higher numbers indicating higher skills. The highest level of applied math skills needed for these future Arizona jobs is a "5," as you can see by looking over Exhibit A. I then went to the source document that defines what skills are needed at each level. The page that includes level "5" is attached as Exhibit B. These include skills such as "divide negative numbers," "calculate perimeters and areas of basic shapes (rectangles and circles)," and "calculate percent discounts or markups." All of the skills covered under level 5 are within the range of what is tested in the AIMS test, and none even approach what is required in Algebra II. Many students should be taking college entrance tests, but not all, and many

of those who don't can be prepared for successful lives. It makes no sense to tell them that they are failures if they don't perform well on a college entrance test.

Those who do choose to take the ACT test now pay about \$30 each to take the test. Most families can afford to pay this. For those who cannot afford to pay it, ACT waives the fee. It makes no sense to transfer this expense onto the General Fund (including the expense for students who should not be taking the test), when we are unable to meet what should be higher priorities, including paying decent salaries to our teachers.

It appears that the cost of combining a college entrance test with the standards-based test like the AIMS test is far greater than simply paying for someone to take the college entrance test separately. I know you will be studying those costs in some detail. I happen to be familiar with Michigan, because they made a presentation at the Council of Chief State School Officers. Arizona's cost for all of its statewide tests (both AIMS and *TerraNova*) is about \$11 per student. Michigan anticipates its cost next year at \$115 per student – TEN TIMES AS MUCH. (See Exhibit C, document received from the Michigan Department of Education.) Exhibit D is a copy of one of the pages from the Michigan PowerPoint at the Council of Chief State School Officers. It states:

### Sticker Shock

- Lobbying claims
  - ACT-based NCLB test will be
    - Less expensive
    - Better aligned to Michigan standards
    - Take less time to administer
- Reality
  - More than triple the cost
  - Requires significant augmentation
  - Takes significantly more time to administer

### VIII. Conclusion.

I look forward to discussing these matters and anything else that interests you next Wednesday.